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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN DANANG

1. (SBU) Summary: During a visit to Danang September 30 and October 1, religious leaders from GVN-recognized Catholic and Protestant denominations painted a picture of provincial leadership that is tolerant of organized religion. While bemoaning their lack of "complete religious freedom," they told us their situation is getting "easier everyday." Church leaders were skeptical that the new religious ordinance would create major improvements when it comes into effect on November 15, but neither did they think that it would constrain their activities. A new SECV initiative to train 600 new pastors in their local jurisdictions is awaiting GVN approval. The apparent key to church leaders' success in Danang is their effort to reach out to local GVN leaders -- from the village level on up -- and to demonstrate that they pose no threat to continued Communist Party rule. In return for what appears to be largely pro forma acknowledgments of Party authority, Church leaders are relatively free to go about their business. End Summary.

2. (U) During the visit of CG and a ConGen HCMC team to Danang September 30 and October 1, PolOff met with Pastor Nguyen The Binh, Head of the Danang Southern Evangelical Conference of Vietnam, and Father Tran Quoc Viet, a senior priest in the office of the Danang and Quang Nam Bishop's diocese, to review the status of the Protestant and Catholic Churches in Danang. Meetings with local GVN officials and reporting on economic and consular issues are covered septel.

The Danang Protestant Community

3. (SBU) Pastor Nguyen The Binh, head of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) chapter in Danang (strictly protect), told us that the GVN-recognized Protestant community in Danang had a positive relationship with local authorities. The Danang SECV has not experienced limitations on its freedom to assemble and worship -- the 10,000-strong SECV community routinely gathers without incident in 11 GVN-sanctioned churches. The pastor added that this past August, the local chapter of the SECV also organized a 3-day region-wide conference that attracted some 4,000 believers, including ethnic minorities. According to the pastor, the SECV did not have to seek permission from local authorities to hold the conference, but merely had to "register" the activity with the People's Committee and the local Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA). In general, the Danang SECV notifies local authorities with a list of its planned activities once a year.

4. (SBU) Pastor Binh told us that there has been some recent movement in addressing his biggest concern: the shortage of GVN-recognized pastors in Danang. Currently there are only 8 pastors authorized to cover the 11 churches in the Danang SECV community. According to the pastor, there is a pending agreement between the GVN and the SECV to allow local SECV chapters to provide "in-service" training for pastors in the provinces in lieu of sending trainees to the SECV seminary in Ho Chi Minh City. (In practice, these "trainees" have been working unofficially in local communities already.) According to the pastor, Danang will receive 10 of the 600 slots that the SECV national leadership might be allocated for an in-service program.

5. (SBU) Separately, Tran Ngoc Du of the SECV National Board in HCMC confirmed that the SECV in August submitted a proposal to the GVN requesting approval for "in-service" training courses for 600 pastor-candidates now ministering unofficially in the 34 provinces in which the SECV functions. The duration of the course would be three months. According to Du, Danang province would receive 15 of those slots; the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai would be granted 30 in-service training slots. The SECV anticipates a GVN reply to its proposal by the end of 2004.

6. (SBU) Pastor Binh told us that he meets at least quarterly with the local CRA. He characterized the CRA as accessible and his meetings as relaxed and open. However, the CRA has not yet briefed the SECV on the new religious ordinance, because, the pastor believes, local authorities have not yet received implementation instructions from Hanoi. The pastor does not anticipate that the ordinance will bring significant changes to what he says is a favorable relationship with the GVN. He is concerned, however, that without uniform instructions, local authorities elsewhere in Vietnam will continue to interpret rules government religious practice as they please, perpetuating problems where problems exist today.

17. (SBU) Also problematic was the local authorities refusal to resolve satisfactorily issues of expropriated church property. Pastor Binh said there were a number of properties in Danang that the GVN expropriated post 1975. Discussions on compensation have not been fruitful.

18. (SBU) Pastor Binh said that there is a small -- "few hundreds" -- house church movement in Danang operating under the umbrella of the hitherto unrecognized Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF). Binh said that, as far as he was aware, these worshipers gather in large groups every Sunday without incident or police harassment. He added that two local VEF-affiliated churches recently petitioned the GVN for recognition.

Catholic Church

19. (SBU) Father Tran Quoc Viet, a senior representative of the Bishop of Danang and Quang Nam provinces (strictly protect) told us that the situation today for the 60,000 Catholic believers was far improved from a decade ago. The 70 priests in the diocese were sufficient to minister to the faithful. Urban areas in the diocese are particularly free from acrimony as local authorities are more used to worshipers congregating in large numbers.

10. (SBU) Father Viet said that problems remain in the countryside, particularly among police and especially in areas where the Church is reaching out to new parishioners. He said that even here there has been some progress. He related an incident in which local Ministry of Public Security officials in an ethnic-minority area of Quang Nam province sought to prevent Church activity in the region. However, after two years of dialogue and cajoling, he was able to win their acquiescence. The key, he said, was that the police were reassured that the Church activities were not designed to incite anti-Hanoi sentiments among the Montagnards.

11. (SBU) Father Viet said that the new ordinance on religion would do little to bring Vietnam to a "true state" of religious freedom, which he defined as the pre-1975 status where the Catholic Church was free of all state controls. Any progress depended on the yet-to-be-issued implementation guidelines. The Danang/Quang Nam diocese also was highly dissatisfied with the GVN's nickel-and-dime approach to compensation of the Church property expropriated in 1975. In his view, other dioceses, particularly HCMC, have made more progress toward recovering or being compensated fairly for expropriated property.

Comment: Lessons Learned

12. (SBU) The message from the GVN-recognized Christian community in Danang was the most positive we have heard in southern Vietnam thus far. What seems to set Danang apart from other provinces is the good personal and institutional relationship between the protestant and Catholic Churches and local authorities.

13. (SBU) The SECV's Vietnam roots are in Danang -- its mother church was founded here in 1911 and the current SECV head representative has been working with Danang authorities for over 30 years. Similarly, the Catholic Church is a known commodity and familiarity breeds acceptance. Equally important, Danang church leaders appear to have taken a long-term approach to build trust with local officials. Their view is that by showing some measure of fealty to the State -- working through the system and assuaging the paranoia of local leaders that they will use religion to weaken the hold of the Communist Party -- they receive cooperation and some measure of autonomy in return.

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